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Justice Department taking action in Hartford, 4 other cities

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HARTFORD, Conn. -- The Justice Department will send teams of federal agents to fight violent crime in Hartford and four other cities, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales said Monday.

The move is an extension of a program begun last year in 15 cities. Investigators focus on prosecuting people for firearms violations, which often accompany gang activity, illegal drug organizations and organized crime.

U.S. Attorney Kevin O'Connor said he sought to include Hartford because the program has been effective elsewhere. "I have watched as it's made a real impact on those cities in terms of a dramatic decrease in violent crime rates," he said.

He expects at least two agents, likely from the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco Firearms and Explosives, to be assigned full-time to what will be known as a violent crime impact team. The agents will work with the Hartford Police Department, probably to target repeat offenders.

"My guess is these resources will be dedicated to go after the worst of the worst," he said, adding the program will enhance efforts to curb violent crime that are already underway.

The announcement comes a week after two teenagers were shot to death in separate incidents in Hartford.

Lorenzo "Morgan" Rowe was fatally shot while walking home from a basketball game at Weaver High on Feb. 22. The honors student was with a group of about 10 other students. Police believe the shooting was a case of mistaken identity; two teenagers have been charged with his murder.

Two days later, 14-year-old Reinaldo Batista was stabbed to death at a McDonald's restaurant as he stepped into a fight between his mother and two other women.

Mayor Eddie A. Perez said the city started working closely with state and federal authorities in 2003 after a spike in gun violence. "I'm very happy that they were able to include us," Perez said. "We need all the help that we can get."

Gonzales said other cities that will be included are Camden, N.J.; Fresno, Calif.; Houston and New Orleans.

Gonzales made the announcement in his first lengthy address since becoming attorney general in early February.

The program started last year with teams of agents using high-tech surveillance and other techniques to identify the worst gun offenders in 15 cities.

Those cities were Albuquerque; Baltimore; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Tampa, Fla.; Miami; Richmond, Va.; Greensboro, N.C.; Tulsa, Okla.; Pittsburgh; Las Vegas; Columbus, Ohio; Philadelphia; Los Angeles; Tucson, Ariz.; and the Washington, D.C.-Northern Virginia region.

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